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Statement submitted by Nation Builders Organisation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

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Statement

Status of women

Various communities and nations have had women relegated to the back far too long. Though a tangible development has been made in different communities and at various levels of leadership, the obvious still remains that there is a long way to go in our race for gender equality.

In India, the status of women has undergone a phenomenal change from what it used to be to what we have now, from a largely unknown status in ancient times through the low points of the medieval period, to the promotion of equal rights in recent decades. In the ancient times, the primary duty of women was service to one's husband. Scholars, however, believe that in ancient India, women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life.

Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rigvedic verses suggest that the women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their husband. Gargi and Maitreyi were notable women sages mentioned in scriptures such as Rig Veda and Upanishads.

The Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent brought the purdah practice in the Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practised. In some parts of India, the Devadasis or the temple women were sexually exploited. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to Zenana areas.

In spite of these conditions, there were exceptions as some women excelled in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. Prominent among them are Razia Sultana, Chand Bibi, Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, Rami Janabai and Lai Ded. Some Bhakti sects and Guru Nanak preached the message of equality between men and women.

During the British Raj, many reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule etc. fought for the upliftment of women. Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of the Sati practice in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's crusade for the improvement in condition of widows led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Many women reformers such as Pandita Ramabai also helped the cause of women upliftment.

Rani Lakshmi Bai and Begum Hazrat Mahal, were notable women who led the revolt of 1857. Women also played an important part in India's independence struggle. Some of the famous freedom fighters include Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Annie Besant, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kriplani and Durgabai Deshmukh. Chandramukhi Basu, Kadambini Ganguly and Anandi Gopal Joshi were few of the earliest Indian women to obtain educational degrees.

In modern India, traditions such as sati, jauhar, and devadasi have been banned and are largely defunct. However, the purdah is still practiced by many Indian women, and child marriage remains prevalent despite it being an illegal practice under current Indian laws. Women now participate in all activities such as education, politics, media, art and culture, service sectors, science and technology, etc.

The Constitution of India guarantees to all Indian women equality (Article 14), no discrimination by the State (Article 15(1)), equality of opportunity (Article 16), and equal pay for equal work (Article 39(d)). In addition, it allows special provisions to be made by the State in favour of women and children (Article 15(3)), renounces practices derogatory to the dignity of women (Article 51(A) (e)), and also allows for provisions to be made by the State for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42).

The feminist activism in India picked up momentum during the 1970s, which forced the Government to amend the Evidence Act, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Penal Code and introduce the category of custodial rape. Female activists united over issues such as female infanticide, gender bias, women's health, and female literacy. Many women's groups launched anti-liquor campaigns in Andhra Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and other states.

In the 1990s, grants from foreign donor agencies enabled the formation of new women-oriented Non-Governmental Organizations. Self-help groups and Non-Governmental Organizations such as Self Employed Women's Association have played a major role in women's rights. Many women including Medha Patkar (Narmada Bachao Andolan) have emerged as leaders of local movements. The most prominent Indian women are Indira Gandhi, Pratibha Patil and Meira Kumar the trio hold the distinction of being the Prime Minister, President and Speaker of the Lok Sabha respectively.

The steady change in the position of women can be highlighted by looking at what has been achieved by women in the country since Independence. In 1951, Prem Mathur became the first Indian woman commercial pilot of the Deccan Airways. In 1959, Anna Chandy became the first Indian woman judge of a Kerala High Court. In 1972, Kiran Bedi became the first female recruit to join the Indian Police Service.

In 1984, Bachendri Pal became the first Indian woman to climb Mount Everest. In 1989, Justice M. Fathima Beevi became the first woman judge of the Supreme Court of India. In 1993, Priya Jhingan became the first woman to be commissioned into the Indian Army. In 1994, Harita Kaur Deol became the first Indian woman pilot in the Indian Air Force, on a solo flight. In 2000, Karnam Malleswari became the first Indian woman to win an Olympic medal.

The year 2001 is seen as a landmark as it was declared the Year of Women's Empowerment (Swashakti) by the Government of India. The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women was also passed the same year. Two states, Kerala and Mizoram, have attained universal female literacy rates. In urban India, girls are nearly at par with the boys in terms of education.

In regards to workforce participation, contrary to the common perception, a large per cent of women in India work. In urban India, women have impressive numbers in the workforce and are at par with their male counterparts in terms of wages and position in the workplace. In fact, 30 per cent of the software industry workforce is female. In rural India, agriculture and allied industrial sectors employ almost 90 per cent of the total female labour.

In overall farm production, women's average contribution is estimated at around 60 per cent of the total labour. Women account for more than 90 per cent of

total employment in dairy production in India. They also constitute 50 per cent of the total employed in forest-based small-scale enterprises. (VINEET PRAKASH)

Though we have wedged a good war on the status of women, there is still more to do, let's not relent, we've got this. The world needs more strong women,

Great heart, true faith and ready hands,

Women who the lust of office cannot kill,

Women who the spoils of office cannot buy,

Women who protect opinions and a will,

Women who have honour, women who would not lie,

Women who can stand before a demagogue and

Dame his treats flatteries without winking.